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by Peter Quennell

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MASQUES & POEMS

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# MASQUES & POEMS

:: BY PETER QUENNELL ::



THE GOLDEN COCKEREL PRESS  
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CHEAPER EDITION

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ᾠ φίλοι, οἳ μέγα ἄστυ κατὰ ξανθοῦ Ἀκράγαντος  
ναίετ' ἄν' ἄκρα πόλιος, ἀγαθῶν μελεδήμονες ἔργων,  
χαίρετ' ἔγὼ δ' ἴμμιν θεὸς ἄμβροτος, οὐκέτι θνητός,  
πωλεῖμαι μετὰ πᾶσι τετιμένος, ὥσπερ ἔοικεν,  
ταινίαις τε περιστέπτος στέφασίν τε θαλείοις.

EMPEDOCLES

'O lyre, O lyre, I love thy tone, thy drunken  
tone of toads.' THUS SPAKE ZARATHUSTRA

TO M.  
&  
C. H. B.

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*An Invocation*

O YOU who flame from height to height  
O Born of summer drift  
That lapse  
To earth, as light between clear leaves,  
Between Night's palms;  
Who come within the wind as running fire,  
Before the wind to silence,  
You that fall  
So small—a mere disquiet in the grass.







THE MASQUE OF THE THREE BEASTS



## *The Masque of the Three Beasts*

### SCENE I.

*Curtains. A KING (not the conventional sort), and with him two attendant HORSEMEN. Enter three BEASTS, trotting beautifully, and depart.*

### KING

**W**HERE, where, do the three beasts go?  
Winds, coming from everywhere,  
Going to everywhere,  
They should know.

Perhaps they come from Syria,  
The Cham, or Illyria,  
Or the crocodile king.

In green caves sits Grendel,  
Under the water.  
Have they visited him, I wonder?

In green caves sits So-and-So,  
Lord of the Brigands.  
Have they visited him, I wonder?

Mayhap they go trotting,  
To nowhere in particular,  
To buy amber bracelets,  
To hang around their curlèd tails.

*To the* FIRST HORSEMAN:

Small and round sits Tandel,  
Playing on a flageolet.  
He has a blue silk lining.  
Go, and bid him  
Ask the beasts politely  
To stop and converse.

*The* HORSEMAN *goes out.*

*To the* SECOND HORSEMAN:

O the curl of a tail,  
The occasional prance,  
May be lost, dear Sir,  
May be lost.  
Go and implore them with weeping.

SCENE II.

*A mountain . . . cold and windy. The BEASTS, TANDEL, and the SECOND HORSEMAN.*

TANDEL

Dear beasts, you're so delightful,  
A charming curl of the tail,  
A melodious trot,  
Are things quite poetical.  
Stop here for ever,  
And let us talk  
As wisely as possible.

*The BEASTS, quite politely, take no notice and trot out.*

SCENE III.

*The KING and the curtains. TANDEL is shaking his head.*

KING to TANDEL

Horrible person,  
Less than nobody,  
Worse than nobody,  
Saucer eyes—  
Hair like shavings—  
And belly—  
And horrid pomposity—  
Stab you?  
Throw you down the staircase?  
I might  
If I thought you'd do it gracefully,  
But you wouldn't.

TANDEL *walks out limply.*

*The KING laments in a sing-song voice:*

I shall never console myself  
With clouds, cuckoos, or small ivory beasts.  
Dandelion clocks or camphor  
Will make me lament afresh.

Sitting among foxgloves,  
In a small wood clearing,  
Someone with goat legs will see them,  
Crossing the clearing with divine trottings.

But he will forget about them,  
And so I shall go on lamenting.

Battles or duels or falling turrets,  
Or, indeed, small pieces of polished green thunder,  
Will be their very sad end.  
But still, the ghostly tail curled complacently,  
Over a windy hill, in the evening, they'll trot and  
disappear.







THE MASQUE OF THIN HORSES



## *The Masque of Thin Horses*

### SCENE I.

*A man, dressed like a SHEPHERD, in cloak and hat—he says:*

**L**IKE a slip of foam  
Alone on the smooth grey back of a wave  
I sit,  
And grasshopper-like  
Make songs  
Of honey and brown bees  
Of locust beans,  
Ash trees and apples.  
And around me,  
From the cold thorn woods  
And the blue mountain tops,  
Beasts  
Great as clouds and as strange,  
Move.  
I hear no flutings  
And Arcadian laughter  
But heavy mouthed mumblings  
Of songs that are ancient  
As the moon or the mountains.

*The THREE BEASTS are heard singing:*

Jammy-mouthed from the feast of the gods,  
From the far crystal cities,  
We come.

*They enter.*

*The SHEPHERD says:*

Was it Hanuman, child, sent thee hither,  
Or fair Hyacinthus?  
For the Apples of Youth or pomatum  
Cam'st trotting my infant?

*The THREE BEASTS say:*

Jammy-mouth from the feasts of the gods  
From the far crystal cities  
We come,  
Where in talking trees  
The old beast sings  
To himself  
And his voice  
Is terrible to the kings of cities.  
From this globular grey hubble-bubble  
We come.

*Turning to the SHEPHERD:*

Who are you? You are someone?

Or nothing?—mere nothing  
In twirls of blue vapour?  
And what do you do on the mountain?

*The SHEPHERD replies:*

Borne on thin legs of illusion  
I walk on smooth mountains,  
Where curled clouds are neighbours  
To poplar trees, laughing together.

*The THREE BEASTS*

O Pouf,  
You're a poet.  
This lather  
Of froth piling verse  
Is too tiring!

*The SHEPHERD*

You grasp the cold leg of truth  
With most deft fingers,  
And now I will bubble a lyric.

*The THREE BEASTS (sighing)*

Ah, bubble; yes, bubble.

*The* SHEPHERD

‘Hrupp for the fire-bird,  
Eating sunflowers.  
Hrupp for the leopard  
Strangely melancholy.  
Hrupp for things magical,  
All things fantastical,  
In the White World.  
And this small lyric,  
This green frill,  
This bubble,  
This smell of strange fruits  
From a land half remembered,  
I made under camphor trees,  
Singing it, buzzing it,  
While the sunlight through camphor leaves  
Made patterns  
And leapings  
On each ear.’

Again now—but one more:

‘If the moon laughed at me  
I should extend my fingers—  
Silver curled fingers,  
Lifted all disdainful.’

*To the* THREE BEASTS:

Cold pale moon and silver fingers  
Placed together, form a lyric.

*The* THREE BEASTS

We dislike the silly wriggles,  
Strangely frothing things called 'Lyrics!'  
Go to Shepherd!  
We are going  
Wide-eyed Something;  
All fair beasts and noble creatures—  
Fire Birds, Norka, Salamander,  
Must be leaping.  
See our golden  
Tails in seemly curls and wonder  
At our beauty, so delightful  
To the thorn woods!  
What, my creature?

*The* SHEPHERD

And why to the thorn woods?  
Things too old to be pleasant  
And sometimes a blue wind  
    Walks in the thorn woods.  
Wherefore my children and thus—so  
O fair prancing children of beauty—  
    Go to the South  
    To the fat land  
    Of garlanded goats  
    And lute players.

O go to the South,  
Where the bird calls shrill in amazement  
To see on thin horses of glamour  
Five kings hunting thistle-down.

*The THREE BEASTS say:*

Why should we go to a fat place  
Of sunflowers and cheeses?  
Blue cheeses were never quite lyrical,  
And for sunflowers my pink tongue suffices.

*(The SHEPHERD sees for a moment a tongue thrust out in contempt.)*

*They begin to stamp.*

To the Forest  
We are going,  
Leaping,  
Prancing,  
And, O Shepherd,  
Tongued like grasshopper of summer,  
Muffle up the unfed twitterings  
Of your soul.  
O, farewell, poor piping songster.

*They go out.*



SCENE II.

*A garden in the middle of a Thorn Forest—cold, blue, frosty, and a lopsided bird sitting on a post.*

The THREE BEASTS *come in.* They say:

From the Thorn Forests,  
Where the Bird  
Wheedling  
Calls to somebody  
Of whom we see nothing,  
Of whom we know nothing,  
We come.

We come to the palings,  
The blue knock-kneed palings  
Of this garden  
Where the tufted onion  
Grows in the hard ground.

To the BIRD:

The true bird leaps on his legs  
And his eye is round and polished  
But you sit sleepily,  
Absently,  
Awkwardly,  
Stirring sometimes your long wings.  
Now why are things this wise?  
My tail and my soul make one question.

*The BIRD*

A legend—a long one  
Such as may not roll silver  
    On a mad poet's tongue—  
    Now listen:

A god in the twilight—  
The long green hair of the god  
    And his delicate finger-tips  
        Were a-shiver,  
    For in the blue twilight  
        He feared that never  
    Might he open the parcel,

Or untie the most ambrosial knots;—  
    And so his eye  
        Rolled flickery,  
    For he held in his parcel  
        Crystal things,  
    That one may not buy  
In any little shop in Tartary,  
    Where the thick curling smell  
        Obscures the senses.

And suddenly the crystal things  
Departed elsewhere in a ring and a tinkle.  
And as the tinkle of broken crystal died,  
The god said suddenly  
    Words flavoured curiously.

He said such things  
As made those well-wrought pillars  
On which the good fat world rests all content  
To wobble and waver,  
And in the little puddle of existence  
Stirred up much mud.

So through the black thorn woods,  
Where every tree  
Sleeps in the cold,  
The god came here,  
And here lives  
In a small frost-cracked house.

*To the BEASTS:*

And now with a stamping of feet  
And a waving of tails, depart O my children,  
Go as you came and be joyous,  
Lest with the crook of a finger  
The god should constrain you to enter  
His blue frost-cracked house.

*The THREE BEASTS*

We like to think—it gives us a replete  
And golden feeling—we're that smooth pied  
egg  
All time's intent on hatching. Therefore we  
Will not go. . .

*The* THREE BEASTS stand still—leap forward and melt away on the  
frosty air of the garden.

*The* BIRD

He crooked his finger. . .

*To the* PEOPLE watching the masque:

There is a long space after this  
—A silence—  
Of several days,  
Patched sometimes  
By the wind-pushed squeak of trees.  
Fill that up. And see the shepherd creature,  
Hear him children.

*A man—dressed like a shepherd—in a broad-brimmed hat and grey cloak,  
rushes in. He says:*

And the Beasts?

*The* LOP-SIDED BIRD says:

The Beasts—A little grain of beast  
Is everywhere, O crumpled desperate man,  
And every crack or crunch,  
Of ground or tree,  
This garden gives  
Has something of the voice  
Of those same beasts you saw not long ago.

*The SHEPHERD, overcoming a heavy amazement, says:*

As fair as cobwebs  
Will I build a temple  
On Corinthian columns  
Standing slender:—  
Carve the three Beasts, smiling,  
As gods smile in temples,  
Rub them to a smoothness,  
Paint them noble colours.

A thousand years gone and the colour  
Will be washed from my carved beasts,  
But round smooth nose and long lip and nostril  
A little will linger,  
That an anklet may chink in amazement,  
A hand may be lifted in horror,  
And the small green eye of the tinker  
May be round in alarm.

SCENE III.

*Enter two RONINS with pikes—the MASQUE OF THIN HORSES as a small wizened thing in a long saffron robe.*

*They prod it with their pikes, saying:*

See, it is long and disjointed—

See, it is thin as the new moon—

Like the pains of a small pale god-child

Who has eaten green asphodel.

*They lift it by its robes and carry it out.*



## POEMS





*Rubbish*

**R**UBBISH—most beautifully shadowy rubbish  
That I have carried through the hollows of  
the winter,  
To-day I leave you.  
You have followed me and hung about my hands  
Cloaked in my thoughts and cumbering me.  
To-day I leave you.  
Slip back into the twilight whence you came,  
Less than the shape of a cloud to a dull man—  
Dust-scented lumber, flitting helplessly  
Before the divine emptiness of a keen spring sky.

*Prayer to the Dragon of the Lake*

**B**RONZE, and silver's cold-eyed flower,  
All that yields to change and purpose,  
Quick, unclouded, light conceived  
To the breath of sudden freedom;  
Untroubled spirit and unshadowed, child  
Of the light limbs of wind and rain;  
For forgetting, for fulfilment,  
Bronze, and silver's cold-eyed flower;  
In your depths I call you, Lord  
Of what is, of coil and ripple  
Sound and colour. . . . .

*Procne*

A fragment

**S**O she became a bird and bird-like danced  
On a long sloe-bough, treading the silver blossom  
With a bird's lovely feet,  
And shaken blossoms fell into the hands  
Of Sunlight. And he held them for a moment  
And let them drop.  
And in the autumn Procne came again  
And leapt upon the crooked sloe-bough singing,  
And the dark berries winked like earth-dimmed beads,  
As the branch swung beneath her dancing feet.

*A Man to a Sunflower*

**S**EE, I have bent thee by thy saffron hair  
—O most strange masker—  
Towards my face, thy face so full of eyes  
—O almost legendary monster—  
Thee of the saffron, circling hair I bend,  
Bend by my fingers knotted in thy hair  
—Hair like broad flames—  
So—shall I swear by beech husk, spindleberry,  
To break thee—saffron hair and peering eye  
—To have the mastery?

*Perception*

**W**HILE I have vision, while the glowing  
bodied,  
Drunken with light, untroubled clouds,  
with all this cold sphered sky,  
Are flushed, above trees where the dew falls secretly,  
Where no man goes, where beasts move silently,  
As gently as light feathered winds that fall  
Chill among hollows filled with sighing grass,  
While I have vision, while my mind is borne  
A finger's length above reality,  
Like that small plaining bird that drifts and drops  
Among these soft lapped hollows,  
Robed gods, whose passing fills calm nights with sudden  
wind,  
Whose spears still bar our twilight,  
Bend and fill wind-shaken, troubled spaces with some  
peace,  
With clear untroubled Beauty,  
That I may live, not chill and shrilling through per-  
petual day,  
Remote, amazed, larklike, but may hold  
The hours as firm, warm fruit,  
This finger's length above reality.

*Small Birds*

**S**MALL birds who sweep into a tree  
—A storm of fluttering, stilled as suddenly,  
Making the light slip round a shaken berry,  
Swinging slim sunlight twigs uncertainly,  
Are moved by ripples of light discontent  
—Quick waves of anger, breaking through the tree  
Into a foam of riot—voices high  
And tart as a sloe-berry.

*Dawn*

**L**IGHT calls of waking birds,  
The silver mist  
In beads of the pale dew  
That gives the dawn  
Its wonder, its still beauty—

For Delight  
Is perfect as a dewdrop—  
Stands awhile  
Glad of her own full beauty  
And faint scent.

*Quiet*

**W**ITH the frayed softness of a folding mist,  
Murmur of garments slipping to the floor,  
Wan as dead grass in twilight, whelmed and  
dim

The town's asleep within a bowl of hills.  
Faces of lamps turn back, remember day,  
As a poor sleeper's thoughts that long to twist  
Their yielding substance from the hand of sleep.



*The Cuckoo sings as he passes across the face  
of the Lake*

**A**TE, Ate, Ate,  
You are my mother, my mother,  
In the peaks of air bore me.

I come to waste spaces aëreal;  
Lo, blossom breaks and clear leaf,  
Below me, below me.

From the hollow of space, from a windless  
Heaviness, wrath for not being,  
From the face of a sea unnamed,  
I come.

Between the swell of a wave and its birth in  
bright foam,  
Some breath of a wind long travelled  
Conceived me and bore me

O room rush-walled, where fine dust  
Stirs, subtle, unceasing,  
Place of delicate things, I am wind,  
Wind come from a sea hard mouthed;

Bringing stillness of dead things and anger,  
And I bring wasting.  
I have loosed my voice and my anger,  
And ripples are quiet.

Broad leaves of the dove's grove—the quiet  
Soft falling, the swell of huge silence,  
Light ripple of sound faint and ceasing,  
Fruit of great calm, Lap of silence.

I have heard the voices of night, broken upon small  
    pools  
Reed guarded, and freedom like wind  
Has shod me and winged me.

From great quiet to quiet,  
By anger of leaf and wind,  
To a Paphos of mind,—an end  
Silent, unshadowed.

Haé, Haé, Haé,  
Ate O Ate, my mother,  
Give me fulfilment and ceasing.





*Pursuit*

**A**S wind drowned scents that bring to other hills  
Inquiet memories of silences,  
Broad silences beyond the memory,  
As feathered swaying seeds, as wings of birds  
Dapple the sky with honey-coloured gold,  
Faint murmers, clear, keen winged of swift ideas  
Break my small silences;  
And I must hunt, and come to tire of hunting,  
Strange laughing thoughts that roister through  
my mind,  
Hopelessly swift to flit; and so I hunt  
And come to tire of hunting.

*The Lion of Nemea*

**Y**OU tell me that the beast of Nemea  
—The strident dappled beast of Nemea  
Fell from the moon.

I tell you that this beast of Nemea  
—This strident dappled beast of Nemea  
Passed through deep hollows, fragile, broken woods  
To sheer moon mountains where small antelopes  
With coral tongues caress blue wings of ice.  
He hunted; and the slender antelopes,  
Speaking round icelicks dimpled by their tongues,  
Called him their god—a god whose anger shook  
Those frail cold moonwoods.

## *Light*

**W**HY does light flutter in the lamp like a bird?  
—Fingers that catch and lose—  
—Breath that comes and goes—  
The still golden faces of other lamps—  
Light flutters in the lamp, like a bird.

The afternoon has sometimes filled the panes  
—Damp panes, rain-handled—  
With a wine-coloured warmth,  
Flushed them to colour.

Water and Light seem sometimes forms of colour  
—Colour too fine, intangible  
For the most subtle finger-tips to catch.

Tall as a painted sunlit screen stands Beauty  
Distantly unapproachable—  
Yet touched by the light shadow of a passing bird—  
The bird that passes between man and Beauty,  
Between the silence, the imagined scent  
Of warmly distant, softly moulded hills  
And men—close chambered in a heavy mind  
The bird that passes—as ambassador.

*Starlings*

**B**REAKING into the meeting  
Of a thousand starlings,  
Thousand starlings speaking  
In their own tongue,  
Suddenly seeing me,  
Sight and fear together  
Leaving food with converse  
Showered into air.  
And I who heard their winging  
Rustle of their rising  
Melt into a roar.  
Built in mind their meeting,  
Built their broken feasting,  
Saw the sunlight sleeking  
Head and wing.



## *Sound*

**R**ADIANCE of snow, deep shadowed,  
Where Delight falls wingfolded  
—Birdlike, where his mouth is loosed,  
In his own song sphered and distant,  
To be Sound, clear-globed, immortal,  
Sound, unrippled and untroubled.  
And as within immensity of frost,  
Upon the furthest plume of ice blue wing,  
Soft breaks the water's pulse,  
And as waves spent, wave upon wave, bright-mouthed,  
On feet of stone, so his voice falls,  
That I had thought shod with tall burning ecstasy,  
That cries, like child new wakened,  
Against prisoning silences.

*Leviathan*

**A** S far as Song's bat wing has gone  
Like wind within the void of sky,  
Hearing on stilled airs, on the sea's white  
calm  
Strange wingbeat or clear ecstasy—  
So far is loveliness resolved, like dew  
In her full circled light, her quietude.  
There stays the uncreate, the unbegotten,  
Leviathan, and earth's first sons, great-shadowed.  
Heavy the flowers' spears, huge their cups' circle.

*In Aulis*

**A** GAINST us hath Zeus shut the heaven;  
Has loosed no bird,  
Frozen the sharp leaf,  
Bound the water's crying;  
Still the pursuit and flow of clouds, unrippled  
By stir or eddy of a sky-got radiance;  
Before the dawn's feet only Pandion's daughter  
Breaks on the air's pool, with her flowerless sorrow,  
Her toneless anger.

Yet dew falls; Zeus lets slip the dew  
Steeping the flower's plume, the grass' shining  
staves,  
Brimming the flowers' throat.



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